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Embracing Popular Culture's Fascination with Mythology



by Jeremy Larson

Ubiquity

When the last *Harry Potter* book was released to a frenzied fan base in 2007, one literary historian searched the past for a comparable work that attracted such zealous devotees, and what she uncovered was Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*.¹ Dickens's novels were released as serials in England, a publication process typical for that time, so audiences had to wait for weekly or monthly installments. As the last shipment reached American shores in 1841, impatient fans beset the ships and

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demanded to know if little Nell was alive.² Stories have the power to excite us, and it is axiomatic that people love stories. But I want to consider a specific kind of story: myth.³

The ubiquity of mythology in our culture is undeniable, as our days of the week and some of our months will readily attest. Even our everyday allusions are infused with references to pagan gods and demigods. For example, it is common to hear a football commentator use "Achilles heel" to describe a losing team's inability to convert on the fourth down.

In addition, children's literature has enjoyed somewhat of a mythological renaissance. Trending characters such as Harry Potter and Percy Jackson are actually newcomers—Lucy Pevensie and Bilbo have been around for more than fifty years. Ironically, even atheists have their own fantasy series by Philip Pullman, who designed the *His Dark Materials* trilogy as an attempt to counterbalance the overt theism in C.S. Lewis's Narnia chronicles. Perhaps Christians should take it as a compliment that an atheist felt the need to copy Lewis. Usually, Christians are the ones to create pop culture knock-offs,⁴ and the Christian ghetto is teeming with such silliness. We're often the ones copying others, but recently I saw a bumper sticker that read, "Ankh if you love Isis!" Look, people are finally copying *us*!

Apology

Despite the widespread use of mythology by

Christians in the past—even the recent past—many Christians today have an aversion to mythology and view it through narrowed eyes. But many Christians have seen mythology as something to be commandeered. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, dwarves hire Bilbo as a “thief,” but he is not really *stealing* so much as he is *reclaiming* stolen treasure. The gold and jewels were not Smaug's to begin with. Centuries earlier, Augustine spoke of such re-usurping as “spoiling the Egyptians.” Just as the Israelites exited Egypt laden with Egyptian treasure, Christians have every right to take truthful elements from pagan culture. Truth that has been mined from God's creation “must be removed by Christians” and “put back into the service of Christ.” Furthermore,

Any statements...which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them.... [A]ll branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies..., but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth.⁵

Augustine believed that “A person who is a good and a true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature.”⁶ Put another way, all truth is God's truth. As Peter Leithart notes in his book on classical literature, the wealth of the wicked is stored up for the righteous (Prov. 13:22).⁷

Therefore, in a day when it is fashionable both to elevate STEM fields⁸ over the liberal arts and to disdain mythology as worthless paganism, Christians must be intentional about preserving the rich heritage we have in mythology. A particularly useful touchstone for Christian mythology is Tolkien's essay “On Fairy-Stories,” which appeared in 1947 in a collection published by Oxford University Press. This essay puts forth Tolkien's vision for what fairy-stories⁹ are and what benefits they can bring to readers. Before moving on to a contemporary “myth-smith,” I want to focus on four major concepts that Tolkien explains towards the end of his essay: sub-creation, recovery, escape, and eucatastrophe.

Sub-creation

Before C.S. Lewis's conversion to Christianity, he viewed myths as being worthless lies, despite their being “breathed through silver.” To persuade him otherwise, Tolkien wrote a poem titled “Mythopoeia,” in which he mentions the defaced image of God in man. Tolkien writes about the original mandate for man to exercise dominion over creation. Man is a “Sub-creator, the refracted light/through whom is splintered from a single White/to many hues... /We make still by the law in which we're made.”¹⁰

In other words, since we bear God's image, though imperfectly, we create because God creates. We imitate and glorify the ultimate Creator as we engage in sub-creation. Tolkien puts it more clearly in “On Fairy-Stories” when he writes about creating fantasy: “[W]e make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”¹¹ Of course, Lewis eventually came to agree with Tolkien, and they both used mythology to create their own myths.

Recovery

Lewis and Tolkien believed that their creative storytelling helped familiar ideas appear in a new light. As many of us brought up in the Christian tradition can attest, there is a regrettable familiarity and desensitizing that comes from constant contact with Christianity. As much as we might deny it, the gospel's power over us wanes at times, through our constant exposure to it. Unfortunately, amazing grace is not so amazing the millionth time we hear it, not because we have fallen away as apostates but simply because it is the hapless condition of human beings: We need constant refreshing and reminding that we are the recipients of a truly amazing inheritance.¹² Meeting weekly as a body of believers is one way to remind ourselves of the riches we have in Christ, but repetition does not always do the trick.

According to Tolkien, we need to see things, not merely in *addition* (i.e., week after week) but from a new *position*. Tolkien firmly believed that the creation and reading of fairy-stories could awaken us to the wonder of reality. Tolkien describes this new sense of wonder as a “regaining of

a clear view.... We need...to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness.” Tolkien continues:

This triteness is really the penalty of “appropriation”: the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and [in] acquiring ceased to look at them.¹³

Recovery is a concept Tolkien borrowed from G.K. Chesterton (who himself had picked up the idea from Charles Dickens). One dim and cloudy

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day, Dickens saw the word *mooreeffoc* on the window of a door. It was a door he had passed many times, but he couldn’t recall having seen that word there before. However, it took him only a split second to realize that he was viewing the word “coffee-room” from the *other* side of the pane.

This startling experience caused Dickens to stop and examine the door, something he would have had no cause to do otherwise. Just as we often do in church, with a ho-hum attitude, we tend to look right past the “ordinary” things of life, from the miracle of our beating hearts to the fact that a god once walked among us. To use Tolkien’s wording, *mooreeffoc* “was used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle.”¹⁴

Because of the fall, we do not see things as clearly as we should, and for Tolkien, the point of “recovery” was a “return and renewal of health”¹⁵—a sort of postlapsarian convalescence. It is true that in regeneration, Christ removes the veil from our eyes (2 Cor. 3:16), but just as sanctification is a pro-

cess, we have a need for a constant removing of the veil—not so much the veil of unbelief as the veil of familiarity. Russian Formalists might have called this process “defamiliarization”—that is, helping familiar ideas or objects appear in a new light.

To aid in this veil-removal, Tolkien suggests that we “meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves. This recovery fairy-stories help us to make.”¹⁶ C.S. Lewis also recognized the essential nature of “defamiliarization.” In one of his essays, he writes the following, describing our veils of familiarity as “watchful dragons”:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind [fairy tales] could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did I find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.¹⁷

Mythology is a form of reification—making something abstract more concrete or real. It can provide a kind of template reset that is necessary to see life afresh with a childlike wonder.¹⁸ Tolkien says that “we need recovery,” and “a taste for [fairy-stories] may make us, or keep us, childish.”¹⁹ Mythology can help us recover our amazement of grace when we see it again for the first time.²⁰

Escape

Recovery implies an escape from a state of dispossession, but the kind of escape that Tolkien proposed was not an anti-Christian escapism in which boy-men avoid real-life responsibilities by continuing to live in their parents’ homes and playing *World of Warcraft*, or the kind in which wives spice up their mundane lives by reading the “mommy porn” of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Tolkien’s escape was

not an escape *from* reality but rather an escape *to* reality. Related to his concept of recovery, escape is made possible by recognizing our dullness to the wonder of the world. An innocent prisoner should *want* to escape his drab, lifeless cell. Tolkien writes, “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, . . . he thinks and talks about other topics than jailors and prison-walls?”²¹

One way that Tolkien believed that people became imprisoned was through modern advances. Tolkien hated industrialization, a major cause of factories’ overtaking the beautiful countryside. He even refused to ride in a car. Tolkien’s suspicion of machines is made obvious in Saruman’s Isengard, the epitome of industry, where forests are destroyed and horrific creatures are mined out of the earth.²² (Of course, it is possible, and even necessary, to view industry and mechanics in a more positive light. Even technology is part of God’s creation, so there *must* be a sanctified way of using it for God’s glory.)

Yet, if we are honest, we recognize that the desire for escape is strong within us. In Romans 8:19-23, Paul specifically speaks of the deliverance from the curse of sin that all creation longs for. Tolkien calls our yearning to avoid death the “Great Escape”—“the oldest and deepest desire.”²³ Tolkien writes that this theme of escaping death inspired George MacDonald, a Christian writer of fairy tales. It is no stretch to say that fairy tales, myths, legends, etc. provide this sense of escape better than most other genres.

But our escape is not a reviling of this world. We escape the horrors of this world, not by fleeing from it but by setting it right. As C.S. Lewis puts it, “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.”²⁴ God pronounced His creation to be very good. A healthy escape is not an escape from the goodness of this world but from the perversion that has plagued it since the Fall. We can be optimistic about Christ’s kingly rule over the world, and this optimism leads me to Tolkien’s final point in his essay: eucatastrophe.

Eucatastrophe

According to Tolkien, good fairy stories do not

ignore the fact that terrible things happen in the world, but these stories are optimistic in that they give a “fleeting glimpse of Joy. . . beyond the walls of the world.”²⁵ Whereas catastrophe is literally a downward turn, eucatastrophe is an upward turn, and “when the ‘turn’ comes, [it gives readers] a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.”²⁶ Furthermore, through fairy stories “we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through.”²⁷

Tolkien even went so far as to describe the Gospels as “a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. . . ‘mythical’ in [its] perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels in the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe.”²⁸ But we should not stop with merely appreciating the magical and joyful nature of the gospel. We can create our own stories to reflect the truth about the world and give people a fleeting glimpse of joy. Tolkien writes,

[The good news of the gospel] has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the “happy ending.” The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. . . . [I]n Fantasy he may actually assist in the . . . enrichment of creation.²⁹

Writing mythology can be the calling of a Christian, and the best fairy tales and myths point us to the true Myth, as Lewis described it³⁰—the joyful story of a God-man dying in the place of undeserving sinners to make them inheritors of His Father’s kingdom.

Embrace

As the title of this paper suggests, I believe that Christians should embrace popular culture’s fascination with mythology. However, a true embrace is more than passive acceptance. It is a surrounding, an encircling of something. Christians, as guardians of the true Myth, should be leaders in myth creation, not followers—proactive, not reactive. Far

from evading or blindly imbibing the influx of today's mythological fare, Christians should be active in producing their own feast of fables.³¹

I have already mentioned some of the Christian literary giants of our recent past, but on the contemporary scene, one Christian who is excelling in the sub-creation of myths is Young Adult author N.D. Wilson, a best-selling author of young adult fiction with Random House. Christians have lots of practice complaining about fiction they *don't* like, but here is a Christian who at least is lighting a candle in the fiction world rather than simply cursing the darkness.

The son of a Presbyterian pastor and author, and the graduate of a classical Christian school and college, Wilson has been marinating in Protestant poetics his entire life. Far from *discouraging* him from using mythology, his religious background has been a primary influence in *encouraging* him to create new myths, as each of his YA novels is deeply rooted in mythology.

Leepike Ridge

His first major novel, *Leepike Ridge*, is a work of literary fiction, and the opening sentence itself is a nod to fairy tales: "In the history of the world there have been lots of *onces* and lots of *times*, and every time has had a once upon it."³² There are connections to *Tom Sawyer* and *Robinson Crusoe*, but the strongest connection—that which provides a loose framework for the story—is mythological. Chapter 1 leads the narrative with a young protagonist, Tom, who has lost his father and who is angry that suitors (one of whom is named Leiodes) are beginning to vie for his mother's hand in marriage. When Tom goes on a watery quest to find his father, his mother is left to defend herself against the greedy suitors, and she relies on the wisdom of a neighbor named Nestor. Other characters have names acknowledging the classical source on which *Leepike Ridge* is based, including "Lotus," "Argus," "Sirens," "Cy[clops]," "Medon," "Dolius," and "Ulysses." Tom is swept away by a current that flows underground into a cavernous world, and after many adventures (spoiler alert), he emerges above ground in a chapter titled "Easter." His emergence occurs in a place none other than from underneath the great four-post bed that his father had

made, and Tom is able to save his mother from the suitors in a climactic showdown.

The obvious ties to Homer's *Odyssey* provide not only an engaging time-tested structure of adventure but also a source of amusement and appreciation for older readers who will catch many of the parallels. Wilson defends his copious use of Homer's material in a statement on his blog:

Stealing ideas from contemporaries is rude and tasteless. Stealing from the long dead is considered literary and admirable. The same is true of grave-robbing. Loot your local cemetery and find yourself mired in social awkwardness. But unearth the tomb of an ancient king and you can feel free to pop off his toe rings. You'll probably end up on a book tour, or bagging an honorary degree or two.³³

Writing mythology can be the calling of a Christian, and the best fairy tales and myths point us to the true Myth, as Lewis described it³⁰—the joyful story of a God-man dying in the place of undeserving sinners to make them inheritors of His Father's kingdom.

100 Cupboards series

Wilson's *100 Cupboards* series is tied less to classical mythology than to fantasy and folktale lore. Wilson claims that significant influences on these three books are Spenser's unfinished epic, *The Faerie Queene*; the Scottish mythology of Robert Kirk; and the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott. There are more obvious ties too. In the first book of the series (which his wife has affectionately nicknamed *100 Places to Put Your Plates*), the setting of a small town in Kansas from which a hero is whisked away is redolent of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful*

Wizard of Oz. Furthermore, the fact that the magic portals are cupboards points to at least two sources in popular children's literature: the wardrobe in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and the magic cupboard in Lynne Reid Banks well-known series. The undying witch is, of course, another clear debt to Lewis.

The second and third books in the trilogy—*Dandelion Fire* and *The Chestnut King*—continue the journey through mythic realms, including worlds of alternate history and the very Scottish references to “second sight.” Regarding biblical imagery, which comes across in a very mythic way, Wilson at one point describes an arrow that is “fletched with the feathers of a desert seraph, pointed with a tablet shard brushed by God’s own breath, and shafted on the core of great Moïse’s rod, first found and flown on the ancient field of Ramoth Gilead, killer of kings.”³⁴

These books have sold well. *Leepike Ridge* has sold roughly one hundred thousand copies, and the *100 Cupboards* trilogy surpassed the five hundred thousand mark in 2011.³⁵ Wilson’s current project, a proposed five-book series (*Ashtown Burials*), is his most ambitious yet, and even though his previous books have been successful, the first book of this current series has received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. *Booklist* specifically acknowledged Wilson’s copious “allusions to mythology.”

***Ashtown Burials* series**

The mythological structure of the *Ashtown* books is not as easily discernable as *Leepike Ridge*. *The Dragon’s Tooth* is loosely patterned after Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*,³⁶ but mythological allusions are amply strewn, breadcrumb-like, throughout the stories. We could think of it as mythological and historical bricolage. (Think of Wilson as a mythological bricoleur, or tinker.³⁷) The main characters in the first book, *The Dragon’s Tooth*, are teenager siblings named Cyrus and Antigone Smith, and they must ascend the ranks of a secret order to do battle with an evil character named Mr. Phoenix. In the middle of the novel, one character³⁸ tells the Smith children about the Dragon’s Tooth, which Cyrus secretly has in his possession, although he does not fully know what it is:

“When Man was first tilling ground and tending gardens, before he thought to wall his cities, Draco the Devourer came down from his stars. He hated Man for his body and soul, joined together in one creature, and he meant to rip the two apart forever—Man would be mere flesh, or mere soul, but never both. Old Draco fashioned himself a monstrous scaly body and a set of charmed teeth with edges to them that could slice a soul’s hair sideways.

“But things just didn’t go as planned—they never do for dragons. Raging, Draco spread his wings and dropped through the sky’s floor. Cities burned, and everywhere he went, souls withered, sliced and uprooted from their flesh. But one boy picked up a stone, and while men fled screaming, he threw it into the demon’s mouth and knocked out just one tooth as long as the boy’s own arm. He picked it up by the root, and with it, he slew the dragon body. Draco retreated into the stars, but he left behind that tooth.”

...“Jason used that tooth to fetch the Golden Fleece. Called up immortal warriors with it from sown Dragon’s Teeth, and it was the only blade he could use to cut them down. Cadmus used that blade to call warriors from bone when he founded Thebes. It can call the dead to life—though not as they were—and shatter the undying. Alexander used it to raze the world and only failed when it was stolen. Julius, Hannibal, Attila, Charlemagne, Napoleon, Hitler—all of them sought it, and some of them found it. For a time.”³⁹

The Drowned Vault, book two in the *Ashtown* series (with new characters such as Arachne, Ponce de León, Dracula, and Gilgamesh with his army of transmortals), was released in bookstores in March 2013, and the third installment, *Empire of Bones*, is scheduled to be released in September 2013.

Time constraints prohibit me from addressing the fiction of other contemporary fantasy authors who are Christians, including Brian Godawa,⁴⁰ L.B. Graham, Jeffrey Overstreet, Andrew Peterson, and others. But it is encouraging that instead of admiring the work of the past, contemporary writers are venturing out to model God’s creative act through their fiction, and specifically through mythological narratives. Traditionally, mythology may have been largely in the hands of pagans, but this kind

of storytelling is our “myth-right,” stolen, as it were, from the pagan Esau. This regaining possession is not epitomized by the B-grade copycat kitsch that has colonized today’s Christian bookstores. In the Creation-Fall-Redemption schema, Redemption is a rightful reclaiming of *what is ours* since Creation. What the Fall stole, we must steal back. This theft is not an individualistic, Promethean defiance in the face of the gods. It isn’t really even the deceptive supplanting by a Jacob. It is our birthright and privilege as co-heirs with the Son of God to join with Him in destroying the works of the dragon and making disciples of the pagan nations.

* * *

In October 2012, I had the privilege of interviewing N.D. Wilson about Christians and mythology. That interview can be found at: <http://themundanemuse.blogspot.com/2012/10/nd-wilson-and-mythology.html>

Endnotes

1. <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/for-harry-potter-fans-time-to-enjoy-unknown/57422/>
2. She wasn’t.
3. Although towards the end of this article I do get into mythological elements in some contemporary fiction, I am focusing more on recovering lost ground than on breaking new ground.
4. E.g., a t-shirt with a picture of the blue Twitter Bird and the clause, “Follow Jesus.”
5. *On Christian Teaching* (New York: Oxford, 2008), . 65.
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Heroes in the City of Man: A Christian Guide to Select Ancient Literature* (Moscow ID: Canon, 1999), 20.
8. Science, technology, engineering, mathematics.
9. In this article I am using *mythology* broadly enough to include fantasy, fairy tales, etc.
10. Lines 61-63, 70.
11. “On Fairy-Stories” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Del Rey, 1986), 75.
12. I presented this paper at Dordt College on a Saturday (Nov. 3, 2012), a couple of days after Pete Rollins had spoken at the opening plenary presentation on Thursday. With respect to Pete, who said that if we have to do something over and over again, it must not be working, I believe that God has made us to need constant renewal—we do the same thing over and over again, not because it *isn’t* working but because it’s always in the *process* of working.
13. “On Fairy-Stories,” 77.
14. *Ibid.*, 77-78.
15. *Ibid.*, 77.
16. *Ibid.* Similarly, G.K. Chesterton writes in *Orthodoxy*: “[Fairy] tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water” (New York: Random House, 2001; 51).
17. “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said” in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1975), 37.
18. N.D. Wilson’s non-fiction book *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl* is an attempt to help Christians recover a child-like “wide-eyed wonder in God’s spoken world.”
19. “On Fairy-Stories,” 77.
20. <http://andynaselli.com/see-it-again-for-the-first-time>
21. “On Fairy-Stories,” 79. Again, contra Pete Rollins, who said that there is no difference between “real life” and the fake things we do to escape life (e.g., go to Disneyworld): Certain lifestyles twist our creational telos/purpose—we were made for more. C.S. Lewis said in his sermon “The Weight of Glory” that “we are far too easily pleased”—making mud pies in the city instead of taking a vacation at the beach.
22. Tolkien eventually orchestrates the demise of this tower at the hands—or should I say, branches—of the trees themselves.
23. “On Fairy-Stories,” 85.
24. *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 134.
25. “On Fairy-Stories,” 86.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 87.
28. *Ibid.*, 88.
29. *Ibid.*, 89.
30. *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 66.
31. See Brian Godawa’s book *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002) for more on this idea of evading vs. imbibing (cultural anorexia vs. cultural gluttony). See especially Ch. 1 on “Stories and Mythology.”
32. *Leepike Ridge* (New York: Random, 2007), 1.

33. <http://www.ndwilson.com/blog/faqs/frequently-asked-1/>
34. *Dandelion Fire* (New York: Random, 2009), 330.
35. <http://www.dougwils.com/Shameless-Appeals/the-final-ashlockolypse.html>
36. This is evident from events such as the opening crisis at a hotel, a parallel to the black spot episode with blind Pew, eavesdropping from an apple barrel, and a reference to the fact that dead men tell no tales. Moreover, several key characters are named William Skelton (Billy Bones), who dies early in the story, and a legless cook named Big Ben Sterling (mirroring Long John Silver).
37. I am using *bricolage* in my own way here, not in the way Claude Lévi-Strauss uses it in connection with mythology in *The Savage Mind*.
38. Big Ben Sterling.
39. *The Dragon's Tooth* (New York: Random, 2011), 275-76. Connections to *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* are obvious.
40. Brian Godawa: "The Bible's own appropriation of pagan imagery—such as the many-headed leviathan, or the divine ruling Rephaim of Sheol—illustrates a mythopoeic interaction with surrounding culture that is a common feature of subversive storytelling. One retells the prevailing stories through one's own paradigm. . . . It is not pure fantasy—it's in the Bible—but I'm bringing it to light through the fantasy genre of storytelling" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUIPNaa25FQ>).